

## Between Shift and Shift

—The Long Encounter of *A Vision* and *Finnegans Wake*—

ダレン・ダグラス・モートソン

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*Keywords:* W.B. Yeats, James Joyce, *A Vision*, *Finnegans Wake*, occultism

キーワード: W.B. イェイツ、ジェイムズ・ジョイス、幻想録、フィネガンズ・ウェイク、オカルティズム

Even without delving deeply into W.B. Yeats's *A Vision* and James Joyce's *Finnegans Wake*, certain similarities between the two become evident. Both books are regarded to be the most difficult texts of their respective author's oeuvres, although they are difficult in different ways. *A Vision* poses difficulty in the complexity of the system it represents, while *Finnegans Wake* is difficult in both form and content, in its structure and in its elements. Both, in response to these innate difficulties, have been called eccentric and incomprehensible by critics and general readers alike. Both books took many years to reach their final and completed state, and both were in creation during the key modernist decades of the Twenties and Thirties. Yeats began the background work to *A Vision* shortly after his marriage in October of 1917. He published the first edition of *A Vision* in 1925, which he later repudiated, and published a much altered but perfected edition in 1937. Yeats died in 1939. Joyce began work on *Finnegans Wake* soon after publication of *Ulysses* in 1922, and released much of it in serialized form, but it was not published as a finished whole until 1939, seventeen years later. Joyce himself died in 1941. Another similarity, therefore, is that both were the last major prose works released by their authors before their deaths.

Despite these somewhat superficial similarities, however, the two works are widely different in style, structure, themes and intention. One major point of difference, according to many critics, is in their treatment of the occult. *A Vision* is now mostly acknowledged as being essentially an occult text. The multiple volumes of *Yeats's Vision Papers*, published several decades after *A Vision* and containing many of the author's notebooks and papers from 1917 to 1920, definitively reveal this. These papers show that Yeats and his young wife, George Yeats, were involved in occult practices to contact certain intelligences, called "instructors" or "communicators," who would convey messages to the Yeatses via a process

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of automatic writing. While the 1925 edition of the text states nothing of this, in the authorized 1937 edition Yeats makes this very explicit:

On the afternoon of October 24th 1917, four days after my marriage, my wife surprised me by attempting automatic writing. What came in disjointed sentences, in almost illegible writing, was so exciting, sometimes so profound, that I persuaded her to give an hour or two day every day to the unknown writer, and after some half-dozen such hours offered to spend what remained of life explaining and piecing together those scattered sentences. 'No,' was the answer, 'we have come to give you metaphors for poetry.' (Yeats *A Vision* 8)

When this admission is combined with the knowledge of Yeats's membership in esoteric organizations like the Theosophical Society and the Hermetic Order of the Golden Dawn, as well as his lifelong interest in the mysterious and the supernatural, then the occult character of *A Vision* becomes undeniable. In contrast, this is by no means readily apparent in *Finnegans Wake*. That occult themes, motifs and symbols are present in *Finnegans Wake* is not disputed, but it is usually supposed that Joyce included smatterings of the occult in the same way that he included smatterings of every other subject in his book containing the universe. In other words, Joyce's knowledge of the occult is superficial and his attitude towards it, as evidenced in *Ulysses*, is dismissive and mocking.

A closer look at *Finnegans Wake*, however, and especially at its relation with *A Vision*, reveals that the occult considerations that Yeats explores, far from being solely ironic and decorative, are structural to Joyce's final book. In particular, Joyce's intensive use of *A Vision* in the central and critical Chapter 10 of *Finnegans Wake* (known also as Book 2, Part 2, or simply 2.2) shows the importance that Yeats's book holds for all of *Finnegans Wake*. Chapter 10 points back to the decades long relationship of Joyce and Yeats, largely considered somewhat antagonistic by critics, but in fact an ongoing exchange of ideas and inspiration which should be traced carefully.

Before his first meeting with W.B. Yeats, the twenty-year-old Joyce met with Yeats's friend and fellow poet in the Irish literary movement, George Russell or A.E. Joyce arrived at the poet's doorstep during the summer of 1902. Richard Ellmann recounts that the real reason for Joyce's visit was expressed only reluctantly by the young author:

Russell's life was divided, he told Joyce, into three parts: economics, literature, and mysticism. Was it the economics that interested Joyce? No, it was not that. Joyce finally said shyly what he had prepared as part of his bold offensive in advance, that he thought it possible an avatar might be born in Ireland. (Ellmann *Joyce* 103)

Obviously of the three subjects indicated by Russell, Joyce's most pressing concern was with mysticism. An avatar, a term originating in Hindu thought yet also current among theosophists of the time, refers to a deity or great soul that has become manifested or embodied on Earth. The term will become more significant in this study as it is a key concept in *A Vision* as well as also being present in *Finnegans Wake*. Ellmann goes on to relate that the two writers "took up Theosophical subjects" (Ellmann *Joyce* 103) and that Joyce was very conversant on these topics. At the same time, Joyce took pains to hide his genuine interests in the esoteric to his friends to the point where they thought that Joyce was "merely pulling the older man's leg" (Ellmann *Joyce* 103), only pretending to be fascinated by Russell's arcane lore.

Nevertheless he was genuinely interested in such Theosophical themes as cycles, reincarnation, the succession of gods, and the eternal mother-faith that underlies all transitory religions. *Finnegans Wake* gathers all these up into a half-secret doctrine.' (Ellmann *Joyce* 103)

In 1902, Joyce had barely started his literary career, but we find here that he was already well-versed in the esoteric themes that would become so fundamental to his final masterpiece. Nonetheless, Joyce was never an uncritical follower of theosophically-inspired occultism. Unlike Russell and Yeats, Joyce was never a member of an esoteric society and always inserted an ironic and often mocking distance between himself and these ideas in his writings. His brother, Stanislaus, confirms Joyce's deep interest in theosophy and its centrality to his original meeting with Russell:

At this time he also became very much interested in theosophy and read everything that came into his hands. Theosophy served him as a religion of transition. He read Swedenborg, Blake, Madame Blavatsky, Col. Olcott, Leadbeater and Annie Besant. On their common ground of theosophy he

made the acquaintance of the poet-painter-economist George Russell, who published his poems under the initials 'A.E.' When they first met they discussed theosophy together at Russell's house almost until morning. (Stanislaus Joyce *Recollections* 11-12)

However, Stanislaus Joyce also notes that his brother came to consider his interest in theosophy as "a pure waste of time" (Stanislaus Joyce *Recollections* 12), although it is certainly clear that this interest took up an immense portion of his time during the construction of *Finnegans Wake*. While theosophy itself might have seemed a time-waster to Joyce his broader interest in the esoteric tradition, represented better by William Blake and Giordano Bruno than by Madame Blavatsky or C.W. Leadbeater, continued to grow throughout his career.

In October of 1902, in a meeting arranged by Russell, Joyce finally met Yeats in Dublin. Ellmann's account of this meeting has become classic itself: "The defected Protestant confronted the defected Catholic, the landless landlord met the shiftless tenant" (Ellmann *Joyce* 104). What also emerged from this meeting is a line apparently from Joyce—there are various accounts given—that has come to define, rightfully or wrongfully, both this meeting and the whole relationship of the two writers.

"I have met you too late. You are too old." These words, or a version of them, have framed studies of the Joyce-Yeats relationship which is thereafter construed as endlessly antagonistic, irretrievably oppositional. (McCourt 341)

Joyce himself plays with this line in *Finnegans Wake*: "I met with whom it was too late" (*FW* 345.13), as just one example. As McCourt argues in his essay, however, the relationship between the two writers was far more complex than just one of mutual antagonism, claiming instead that there is a "clear continuum of Yeatsian echoes" in Joyce's writing, more or less apparent, "from *Chamber Music* right through to *Finnegans Wake*" (McCourt 349). This reverence of Yeats and his work by Joyce is also attested to by Stanislaus Joyce, who in *My Brother's Keeper* presents his own version of the initial Joyce-Yeats meeting:

What my brother said, or meant to say, at their first meeting was in plain words that Yeats did not hold his head high enough for a poet of his stature,

that he made himself too cheap with people who were not worthy to dust his boots. But he was aware of the futility of trying to ingraft into the elder man any of his own pride or arrogance as a poet—the choice of words matters little. (Stanislaus Joyce *Brother's Keeper* 184)

This concern by Joyce that Yeats “had made himself too cheap” with people who were really unworthy of his presence, seems confirmed by an anecdote in Ellmann’s account of Joyce’s earlier meeting with George Russell. In their conversation, according to Ellmann, Joyce expressed some appreciation for Russell’s work, “but complained that Yeats had gone over to the rabblement” (Ellmann *Joyce* 103). This phrase “gone over to the rabblement” is significant, and especially if these are Joyce’s exact words, because it directly recalls one of Joyce’s first major essays—and one of the most controversial—“The Day of the Rabblement,” written almost precisely a year before his first meeting with Yeats and directly concerned with Yeats’s early work. This essay, as will be shown, is also an important nexus in the interplay of *A Vision* with *Finnegans Wake*.

“The Day of the Rabblement” was written by Joyce in October of 1901 as a critique to what Joyce believed to be a turn to provincialism and popular appeal in the Irish Literary Theatre, better known by its later name, the Abbey Theatre. Joyce was an early supporter of the Theatre and was an enthusiastic member of the audience in May of 1899 when Yeats’s controversial play *The Countess Cathleen* performed there. *The Countess Cathleen*—Yeats’s first play—centres around the story of a poor and starving peasant, Shemus, and his neighbours who sold their souls to demons in order to provide for their families, and in spite of the charitable efforts of the Christ-like Countess Cathleen. The play provoked boos and hisses from the audience—although Joyce clapped loudly—and was declared heretical by the wider public. A number of Joyce’s fellow students penned a letter of protest against the play, which was published in the *Freemen’s Journal*, but Joyce vocally refused to sign the letter (Ellmann *Joyce* 69). That Joyce greatly admired the play is perhaps best illustrated by the fact that he set the play’s lyric “Who Goes with Fergus?” to music, and later presented this in *Ulysses* as the song Stephen sang to his dying mother in substitution for prayer.

Fergus’ song: I sang it alone in the house, holding down the long dark chords. Her door was open: she wanted to hear my music. Silent with awe and pity I went to her bedside. She was crying in her wretched bed. For those words, Stephen: love’s bitter mystery. (Joyce *Ulysses* 9)

There are several references to *The Countess Cathleen* in *Finnegans Wake*—"Gouty Ghibeline" (FW 71.26), "countless catchaleens" (189.11), "Cowntends Kateclean" (448.10) among others—and it is clear that Joyce kept both Yeats's play and the controversy surrounding it close in his mind even when writing his final book. The damned peasant Shemus also appears directly in *Finnegans Wake*, where he is significantly identified with brother Shem. "Shem is as short for Shemus as Jem is joky for Jacob" (FW 169.1).

Joyce's critique of the Irish Literary Theatre in "The Day of the Rabblement," therefore, can be viewed as a reaction against the Theatre's shying away from brilliant and contentious plays like *The Countess Cathleen*, containing themes and ideas that are universal and timeless, to more tamer plays that were, for Joyce, all too provincially "Irish." The Theatre was, in short, being swayed by the conservative "rabblement," and Yeats, insofar as he was helping to produce such plays, was also sacrificing his genius to the mob. This is precisely what Joyce wanted to convey to Yeats during their first meeting. In "The Day of the Rabblement" he put it in this way:

It is equally unsafe at present to say of Mr. Yeats that he has or has not genius. In aim and form *The Wind among the Reeds* is poetry of the highest order, and *The Adoration of the Magi* (a story which one of the great Russians might have written) shows what Mr. Yeats can do when he breaks with the half-gods. But an aesthete has a floating will, and Mr. Yeats's treacherous instinct of adaptability must be blamed for his recent association with a platform from which even self-respect should have urged him to refrain. (Joyce *Critical Writings* 71)

It is evident in this quite harsh criticism of Yeats, a writer whose work Joyce genuinely respected, that he was attempting to urge the poet back into writing for the artistic few instead of catering to the many. Joyce, in a sense, was not criticizing Yeats's work, but criticizing Yeats's movement *away from* his true work. Joyce attempted to get his essay published in a student magazine, but he was prevented in doing so by the magazine's adviser. Joyce later self-published the essay along with another student's essay in a limited release. It is not known if Yeats actually read the essay—he probably did—but it is clear that Joyce intended it in large part for him.

All this may appear at first to be quite far from the occult themes of *A Vision* and

*Finnegans Wake*, but it is really not so. The now famous opening line of “The Day of the Rabblement” directs us to much deeper connections which require some exploration. “No man, said the Nolan, can be a lover of the true or the good unless he abhors the multitude; and the artist, though he may employ the crowd, is very careful to isolate himself” (Joyce *Critical Writings* 69). And later on: “...it is strange to see the artist making terms with the rabblement” (Joyce *Critical Writings* 69). The “Nolan” here is Giordano Bruno of Nola, and Joyce was apparently content to leave this fact as a mystery for readers to look up on their own, although his essay contains one further clue—“*la bestia Trionfante*” (Joyce *Critical Writings* 70)—which is a reference to one of Bruno’s books on astrology and the art of memory. Joyce is essentially challenging Yeats, through Bruno, to return to his occult roots! This becomes more apparent with regard to the works by Yeats mentioned in Joyce’s essay. The first poem in the collection *The Wind Among the Reeds*, “The Hosting of the Sidhe” (from 1899), is a direct call to abandon this life of the rabblement and its toil, and to join the procession of the fairies:

...Away, come away:  
 Empty your heart of its mortal dream  
 The winds awaken, the leaves whirl round,  
 Our cheeks are pale, our hair is unbound,  
 Our breasts are heaving, our eyes are a gleam,  
 Our arms are waving, our lips are apart;  
 And if any gaze on our rushing band,  
 We come between him and the deed of his hand,  
 We come between him and the hope of his heart. (Yeats *Collected Poems* 55)

The second reference, to Yeats’s short story—*The Adoration of the Magi*, is an even more powerful link in a chain that winds back and forth from Joyce to Yeats, from “The Day of the Rabblement” to *A Vision* and *Finnegans Wake*. *The Adoration of the Magi* is in fact the third story of a three-part set, all published in 1897, which also includes *Rosa Alchemica* and *The Tables of the Law*. We know that Joyce was very familiar with the last two of these stories, but it is quite probable that he knew *Rosa Alchemica* as well. It is useful to provide a very brief summary of these wholly occult tales.

The principal characters of the three stories are also three: Michael Robartes, a dashing spiritual adventurer and magician; Owen Aherne, a more cautious and contemplative friend of

Robartes, who is more interested in Christian mysticism; and Yeats himself. These three are said to be old student friends, and while Robartes and Aherne go on to play crucial parts in Yeats' s personal creative mythology, it is in these stories in which the two first appear. And in both editions of *A Vision*, Robartes and Aherne would return to continue on the story they had left many decades previously. This story begins with *Rosa Alchemica* which tells of how Robartes reappears after a long absence and convinces Yeats to become initiated into the Order of the Alchemical Rose—which apparently has both mortals and immortals as members—and to travel to their Temple on the desolate western coast of Ireland for the full initiation ceremony. After this ceremony the Temple and its members became attacked by outraged and pious local fishermen. Yeats just barely escapes, but Robartes is apparently killed. This passage describes the magical working of the Order and certainly foreshadows themes found in *A Vision*:

The bodiless souls who descended into these forms were what men called the moods; and worked all great changes in the world: for just as the magician or the artist could call them when he would, so they could call out of the mind of the magician or the artist, or if they were demons, out of the mind of the mad or the ignoble, what shape they would, and through its voice and its gestures pour themselves out upon the world. In this way all great events were accomplished... (Yeats *Mythologies* 285)

*The Tables of the Law* relates the story of the reunion of Yeats with another long absent friend, the devote and mystical Owen Aherne. Aherne' s melancholic turn of character alarms Yeats, and he finally convinces his old friend to tell him what is the matter. Aherne explains that he has acquired a lost text written by the medieval mystic, Joachim of Flora. This book, the *Liber inducens in Evangelium aeternum*, is the new book of the law after the old law, contained in *The Bible*, has been superceded; just as the Ages of the Father and Son have been superceded by the new Age of the Spirit. Everything in the world has become redeemed, everything is now holy, and it is no longer possible to sin. Aherne is at first brought to bliss by this new dispensation, but soon realizes that as he is beyond sin he is also outside the need for redemption. This becomes for Aherne a fate worse than damnation. Yeats has a vision of the Order of the Alchemical Rose coming for his enlightened but miserable friend:

And at that cry I understood that the Order of the Alchemical Rose was



not of this earth, and that it was still seeking over this earth for whatever souls it could gather within its glittering net... (Yeats *Mythologies* 307)

The last story of the three, *The Adoration of the Magi*, tells of three old and bearded brothers from a small island off the west coast of Ireland who came to Yeats to share their strange tale. Acquaintances of Robartes, they were one night startled by a voice over the water announcing that Robartes was dead.

While they were still mourning, the next oldest of the old men fell asleep while reading the Fifth Eclogue of Virgil, and a strange voice spoke through him, and bid them to set out for Paris, where a dying woman would give them secret names and thereby so transform the world that another Leda would open her knees to the swan, another Achilles beleager Troy. (Yeats *Mythologies* 310)

So they did, and when they arrived in Paris they entered into a hovel in a poor district and found a beautiful yet almost lifeless woman who had recently given birth to a sort of new Messiah figure “in the likeness of a unicorn” (Yeats *Mythologies* 312). Suddenly, one of the old men went into a trance and a voice spoke through him:

‘When the Immortals would overthrow the things that are to-day and bring the things that were yesterday, they have no one to help them, but one whom the things that are today cast out. Bow down and very low, for they have chosen this woman in whose heart all follies have gathered, and in whose body all desires have awakened; this woman who has been driven out of Time and has lain upon the bosom of Eternity.’ (Yeats *Mythologies* 312)

Yeats concludes from their story that these Immortals are precisely members of the Order of the Alchemical Rose and that the newly born unicorn-being was to be the avatar for this age. The three stories are then intrinsically linked at this level. The first names the Order, the second proclaims the Law, and the third reveals the Avatar of the New Aeon. *A Vision* repeats this pattern also using the words of Robartes and Aherne, with *A Vision* itself becoming the new holy writ.

Joyce not only referenced *The Adoration of the Magi* in “The Day of the Rabblement,”

but explained how much he admired these stories to Yeats directly during a subsequent meeting. Mason and Ellmann, the editors of *The Critical Writings*, explain in a footnote to Joyce's essay that Joyce spoke so highly of the story that Yeats decided to republish them. This he did, prefaced with a note of explanation:

'I do not think I should have reprinted them had I not met a young man in Ireland the other day, who liked them very much and nothing else that I have written.' (Joyce *Critical Writings* 71)

If this story is true it might also mean that Joyce had a hand in keeping the characters Robartes and Aherne alive in Yeats's imagination, and especially for future explorations in *A Vision*. Indeed, Joyce liked *The Tables of the Law* and *The Adoration of the Magi* so much that they may have put them to memory. At the very least, in *Stephen Hero* Joyce writes of how his occasional counterpart, Stephen, used to repeatedly intone these stories during night walks through the streets.

He went through the streets at night intoning phrases to himself. He repeated often the story of *The Tables of the Law* and the story of the *Adoration of the Magi*. The atmosphere of these stories was heavy with incense and omens and the figures of the monk-errants, Ahern and Michael Robartes strode through it with great strides. Their speeches were like the enigmas of a disdainful Jesus; their morality was inhuman or superhuman: the ritual they laid such store by was so incoherent and heterogeneous, so strange a mixture of trivialities and sacred practices that it could be recognised as the ritual of men who had received from the hands of high priests, [who had been] anciently guilty of some arrogance of the spirit, a confused and dehumanised tradition, a mysterious ordination. (Joyce *Stephen Hero* 160)

Joyce goes on to explain that Stephen "has no pains" (ibid.) to believe in the existence of the Immortals of Yeats's stories. This is certainly interesting in light of the relation of these "Alchemical Rose" stories to *A Vision* and the influence of both on *Finnegans Wake*.

In both the 1925 and the 1937 editions of *A Vision*, extensive introductions frame the work in terms of a further Robartes and Aherne adventure. The 1925 edition, subtitled *An*

*Explanation of Life Founded upon the Writings of Giralduſ and upon Certain Doctrines Attributed to Kuſta Ben Luka*, is more elaborate. As explained above, this edition concealed the fact that any of the book's "system" derived from the automatic writing operations of Yeats and his wife. And while Clive Hart points out that Joyce read both the 1925 and the 1937 editions (Hart 66), Alistair Cormack argues that it would have been the ironic tone of the 1937 introductory section that would have appealed most to Joyce. Colin McDowell, however, argues that the introductory stories of Robartes and Aherne in both editions are largely inessential. They act as "a covering device, a way to protect Yeats from the scorn of critics who find him endorsing outlandish things in the book proper." And while we do not have to completely amputate this section, "we do have to bracket off the stories in order to be able to take the rest of the book as a serious exposition of Yeats's philosophy" (McDowell 222). I would argue that these stories are neither a "covering device" nor irrelevant to the rest of Yeats's system, but are integral for making the links outlined above to the "Alchemical Rose" stories that impacted both Yeats and Joyce so deeply. I will turn to the 1937 edition to illustrate this.

Yeats, writing as Owen Aherne's brother John, directly refers back to his earlier stories. In *A Vision*, Robartes and Aherne are very much alive and in his letter to Yeats, John Aherne tries to reassure Yeats that his brother and Robartes are not still angry about the exaggerations Yeats made in his 1897 stories:

Some thirty years ago you made "Rosa Alchemica", "The Tables of the Law" and "The Adoration of the Magi", out of a "slight incident". Robartes, then a young man, had founded a society, with the unwilling help of my brother Owen, for the study of the *Kabbala Denudata* and similar books, invents some kind of ritual and hired an old shed on Howth Pier for its meetings. (Yeats *A Vision* 54-55)

Aherne goes on to explain that a rumour of their activity spread in the community, angry people arrived, and somebody threw a rock and broke a window. Contrary to what Yeats wrote in his story, there was no orgy for the pagan gods and Robartes was not killed. This is all pretty amusing, but it may have the deeper purpose of setting up a direct parallel of *A Vision* with the "Alchemical Rose" stories. In the Michael Robartes stories of *A Vision*, the parallel esoteric order is described as an Arabic sect called the Judwalis or Diagrammatists (Yeats *A Vision* 41); the parallel book of the law is a Renaissance work

called *Speculum Angelorum et Hominum* by a certain Giraldus (Yeats *A Vision* 38), which upon further investigation appears to be very similar to *A Vision* itself; and the parallel avatar or “next divine influx” (Yeats *A Vision* 53) is to be hatched from the recent rediscovered third egg of Leda (Yeats *A Vision* 51). Obviously these themes are no less outlandish than those of the original stories from 1897, but they point to a continuum of ideas that preoccupied Yeats for decades. The new order, law and avatar that Yeats pointed ahead to in 1897 have, through *A Vision*, become manifest in 1937. Certainly the lost egg of Leda is the identical image to the other Leda who “would open her knees to the swan” of *The Adoration of the Magi*. If the later Yeats is more ironic it is perhaps because that he has realized, like Joyce, that irony is a part of the wider cycle he is exploring.

And *A Vision* is, in general, a vast system of cycles, of cycles within cycles, of cycles operating in counter directions to other cycles. It is an attempt, much like *Finnegans Wake*, to account for all the modes and moods of psychology, history and cosmology. Yeats’ system is built on several images and one of the clearest he presents is of the cycle of the moon. In “The Phases of the Moon” section of the 1937 edition, Robartes sings of:

Twenty-and-eight the phases of the moon,  
 The full and the moon’s dark and all the crescents.  
 Twenty-and-eight, and yet but six-and-twenty  
 The cradles that a man needs be rocked in;  
 For there’s no human life at the full or the dark. (Yeats *A Vision* 60)

Each of the 26 phases—omitting the first and fifteenth phases which are respectively pure objectivity and pure subjectivity, and thus unattainable for humans—is associated with a different personality type and a different character of time or history. Over many lifetimes, individuals make their way around the cycle in a course that does not really alter. One half of the cycle moves towards greater subjectivity—called the *antithetical tincture*—which is associated with the individual, the separate, the distinct. And one half moves towards greater objectivity—called the *primary tincture*—which is associated with the merger of the individual with forces bigger than itself: God, nature, society (Mann).

Another image Yeats employs to describe his system, however, is with interpenetrating vortexes or gyres. Yeats equates his idea with the vortexes of Concord or Love and Discord or Strife found in the philosophical fragments of Empedocles:

If we think of the vortex attributed to Discord as formed by circles diminishing until they are nothing, and of the opposing sphere attributed to Concord as forming from itself an opposing vortex, the apex of each vortex in the middle of each base, we have the fundamental symbol of my instructors (Yeats *A Vision* 68).

The key in all of this complexity is to keep in mind two opposing processes occurring at once, and as one diminishes the other grows stronger. As the the moon becomes rounder the dark part of it lessens until the extreme of the full moon, when darkness waxes again. A cone passing through another begins as a single point and then widens to maximum extension to reduce back down to a point. The fundamental idea expressed in Yeats' s system is also found in *Finnegans Wake*: the coincidence of opposites. Alistair Cormack, in his profound study of Yeats and Joyce, places both authors within what he terms "the reprobate tradition" which is named after the idea of the righteous reprobate or outsider in the work of William Blake, another great member of this tradition. Cormack defines this tradition as a type of "heretical idealism," and it is basically synonymous with the Hermetic or esoteric tradition of the West. And within this tradition the coincidence of opposites supplies the basic dialectic.

The coincidence of opposites is a key idea, strangely invisible in the history of philosophy, that can be traced from the pre-Socratics, through Plato' s own encounter with his Eleatic predecessors in the *Parmenides*, into Egyptian Neoplatonism, Gnosticism, the Kabbalah, the "Negative Theology" of Dionysius the Aeropagite and more importantly Nicholas of Cusa, and through Renaissance Hermeticism to its arrival in Bruno's work. (Cormack 42)

Cormack also traces this tradition forward to "the more revolutionary aspects of Romanticism" (Cormack 21), specifically Blake and Shelley, and he stresses its different use of the dialectic than in dominant philosophy:

The form of dialectic that they choose is not the Hegelian one, which they see as being tainted with imperial teleology, but the Hermetic, which dates back beyond Socrates to Heraclitus. Contraries in this tradition are perpetual and self-generating. (Cormack 21)

Thus Shaun never finally eradicates Shem, nor does the primary ever fully conquer the antithetical. There is no final unfoldment of history. The world, and every individual living in it, cycles on without end, winter always yielding to a new bloom of spring. *Finnegans Wake*, as a whole, is a book of cycles—the last sentence flowing into the first—but Chapter Ten, the “night lessons” chapter, particularly exemplifies this idea. And Chapter Ten is also the chapter with the densest cluster of *A Vision* references (Atherton 113, 290).

John Gordon aptly calls Chapter Ten, or Book Two, Part Two, “the crossroads of *Finnegans Wake*” (Gordon 183), the point where one thing could become its opposite. And at the very heart of this chapter is the Euclidean diagram on page 293, composed of two overlapping circles, forming the esoteric symbol of the *vesica piscis*, with two equilateral triangles reflecting each other at their base within this space of overlap. “The diagram on page 293 is, as many have said, the book’s formal centre, introduced with the ‘lapis’ or philosopher’s stone for transmitting one element into another” (Gordon 183). Gordon provides a numbered list of what this diagram may represent. It includes the mother’s vagina which her two sons have spied, perhaps on the toilet; the scene of a naval battle on Dublin Bay; “a magical inscription for the calling of spirits;” and/or “a dirty picture” (Gordon 191). It has also been called a map of the night sky which has been overlapped onto a sky map from 13,000 years into the future, thus tracking the precession of the equinoxes (Benjamin 111). And written just a few lines above the diagram is something that makes the whole thing much more Yeatsian, much more akin to *A Vision*:

...as a poor soul is between shift and shift ere the death he has lived  
through becomes the life he is to die into... (*FW* 293)

Clive Hart explains that Joyce is referring to a process outlined in *A Vision* whereby an individual after death and before its incarnation to another phase in the cycle, passes through several stages in the afterlife where components of its being are subtracted or added. In this case, it is HCE that has entered into this *bardo* state:

In following his career back to its origins in his incarnation as the Son, Earwicker is engaged in the Yeatsian processes of *Dreaming Back*, *Return*, and *The Shiftings*... which in *A Vision* are said to follow immediately on death, preceding the desired spiritual ‘Marriage’ with the Deity and allowing the soul to trace its progress, in the reverse direction, right back to birth. (Hart 92)

With this insight comes the culmination of several decades of mutual influence between Yeats and Joyce. Joyce, here in his own book of dreaming, is effectively admitting that on one level *Finnegans Wake* is an acting out of *A Vision*. That, as in Yeats's book, his dreamers are also the dead. Certainly there are other structural similarities that could be mentioned—the 28 rainbow girls of *Finnegans Wake* may correspond to the 28 phases of *A Vision*, the four old men may correspond with the four faculties, the reflected triangles of the diagram are identical to the “diamond” shaped pattern when the two cones pass through each other—but many of these are also found in the writings of other members of the “reprobate” tradition (notably Blake) who influenced both Yeats and Joyce. The important thing is to realize how the two “systems” are in essence the same. Joyce's interest in the occult or the Hermetic tradition, while not as sustained or as disciplined as Yeats, and always placed within a sort of ironic distancing, is equally as serious and meaningful for the author of *Finnegans Wake*.

And very far from being a rival or antagonistic to Yeats, Joyce remained respectful to the older writer right up until the end. Towards the end of his biography of Yeats, Ellmann writes:

His death was not immediately announced so one wreath did not arrive till after the funeral was over and everyone had left. It was from James Joyce, a fellow symbolist who believed with equal intensity in natural things. (Ellmann *Yeats* 286)

And Stanislaus Joyce writes of the same event,

When he died on the Riviera, the wreath my brother sent for the funeral was a token of sincere homage. (Stanislaus Joyce *Brother's Keeper* 184)

A wreath of course is a conventional symbol for a funeral, but it is also an embodiment of a living cycle; a cycle that continues, for Hermetic symbolists, even after death, from “between shift and shift.”

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(平成29年12月8日受理)